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TOP STORY

Buckhorn Supper Club owner wins Restaurateur of the Year

By Jim Dayton jdayton@gazettextra.com 5 hrs ago



Buckhorn Supper Club co-owner Chico Pope greets customers during dinner Friday at the Buckhorn. Pope was named 2018 Restaurateur of the Year by the Wisconsin Restaurant Association.

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MILTON

When the Wisconsin Department of Tourism was looking for a spot to film a supper club commercial, organizers chose the Buckhorn outside Milton as one of their locations.

It's not hard to see why. The woodsy lakefront views, sports memorabilia, mounted animals on the walls and dimly lit dining rooms make the Buckhorn a classic Wisconsin supper club.

The Buckhorn Supper Club's popularity and success recently earned longtime co-owner Chico Pope the Restaurateur of the Year Award from the Wisconsin Restaurant Association. It's perhaps the most prestigious award in the state's dining industry.

Pope has owned the Buckhorn with his wife, Dawn, for 21 years. Renewed attention on the supper club experience—which invariably includes steak, seafood and brandy Old Fashioneds—has helped the business thrive.

“We’ve been fortunate to ride the wave of resurgence in dining and supper clubs. It’s a whole different type of dining that a lot of younger folks haven’t been exposed to,” Pope said. “Especially in Wisconsin the last couple years, there’s been a great momentum in reintroducing supper clubs to a newer generation of diners.”

Pope is proud of the award, and the large trophy is prominently displayed near the Buckhorn’s entrance. He credited his wife, son Kevin, daughter Shelley Huhnke and the rest of the staff for helping earn the award, which can be won only once.

To win the award, an operator must run a successful business, be involved in the Wisconsin Restaurant Association and be active in the community, he said.

Pope has belonged to the association’s board for 12 years and served as its chairman three years ago. The Buckhorn also routinely has donated to local nonprofits, and it recently organized a benefit for a fellow restaurant owner who suffered a disabling stroke, he said.

It also hosts an annual scholarship dinner for Blackhawk Technical College’s culinary arts program. The dinner typically raises \$10,000 to \$12,000 each year, Pope said.

The Buckhorn has been an institution on the shores of Lake Koshkonong since the 1930s. The Popes both had experience in the restaurant industry and were longtime customers when the building went up for sale, he said.

Since he’s owned the Buckhorn, Pope has made it a priority to develop relationships with his customers. He glides from table to table, greeting people as he goes, and has no problem starting a conversation with anyone, he said.

“That’s my personality. I don’t think you get that at the chain operations,” Pope said. “People, I think, feel more special when the owner comes over and says, ‘How you doing? How’s your food? Anything else I can get for you?’”

He has plenty of stories from his years in the business. He has seen many kids grow up and then return to the restaurant with their own children.

Rep. Paul Ryan is a frequent customer, and Pope said he has given the speaker of the House cooking tips over the phone.

When Pope first took over the supper club, he saw a couple who seemed upset. He decided to talk to them, and they were grateful for him making the effort to personalize their night out, he said.

They’ve become regular customers, and the Popes once joined the couple on a trip to Florida.

If a restaurant owner is only focused on turning a profit, the business won’t survive, Pope believes.

At the end of Pope’s tenure as Wisconsin Restaurant Association chairman, he gave a speech that made the entire crowd emotional and highlighted his outlook on customer service.

He mentioned how one night, a couple came in knowing their grandchild, only a few days old, soon would be pulled off life support. A few tables over, another couple celebrated the birth of their new baby.

The emotional swing of those stories made Pope tear up as he recalled the speech.

“I get emotional because that’s what this business is,” he said. “It’s not about the food. I am so lucky we are able to be a part of that experience. That’s what the restaurant business is to me.”

Jim Dayton
Reporter - Milton & Edgerton

